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ABSTRACT

Research and programs concerning college student retention are considered. Based on research studies, reasons why students depart prior to graduation are examined. The literature about corrective actions that can be taken and University of Tennessee data about student retention are discussed. A recent study at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, examined the retention, attrition, and graduation patterns of over 17,000 in-state freshmen admitted from 1968 through 1973. Females tended to graduate earlier or on schedule more frequently than men, as did students enrolled in the colleges of liberal arts and education. The relationship between student retention and American College Testing scores, grade point average, and other variables was assessed. Two programs aimed at retention at the University of Tennessee are a course centering around study skills, career planning, and selection of a major, and a program in which experienced students volunteer to become big brothers and sisters to incoming freshmen. (SW)

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Teaching-Learning Issues

GREATER RETENTION: KEY FOR THE 80's

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Prepared by the Learning Research Center/The University of Tennessee

This number of TEACHING-LEARNING ISSUES has been prepared by Maxine Thompson, graduate assistant in the Division of Continuing Education and graduate student in the Department of Educational Administration and Supervision, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

You can not teach a man anything;
you can only help him to find it
within himself.

Galileo

Learning Research Center
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

While selected statistics about retention of college students are being quoted today with alarm and fervor, many of them are not at all new. For example, in a classic study[1] in the mid-1950's, it was found that slightly over one-third of entering students actually graduated; that statistic continues to be reasonably accurate. Because of expanding enrollments during the past 25 years, there was little need to be concerned about losing students prior to graduation. Rather suddenly, however, with the advent of stable or declining enrollments, interest has once more developed in retaining students.

This number of TEACHING-LEARNING ISSUES will: 1) consider research evidence about the reasons why students depart prior to graduation, 2) examine the developing literature about corrective actions which can be taken, and 3) introduce local data about student retention.

RESEARCH

In 1957 Iffert[1] surveyed 12,607 students attending 149 institutions of higher education and found that students attend college for various reasons, such as academic, occupational, personal-self, social service, and traditional. Males emphasized occupational motives and ranked academic reasons second; females just the reverse. Twenty-one possible reasons for discontinuing college were listed on the questionnaire. The most important reason for departure reported by males was enlistment in the military service (much of the period under consideration was one of active military action); lack of interest in studies ranked second in importance for them, with personal financial difficulties third. Marriage was the major reason for leaving college among females, taking a full-time job was rated second, and personal financial difficulties ranked third.

All respondents were given an opportunity to grade their reactions to some 40 college facilities and services and to 11 facilities and services not directly related to college. Students were almost unanimous in expressing a low opinion of the counseling, guidance, and orientation services. Assistance received from faculty and counselors on how-to-study techniques and from faculty advisers in helping to select first-term courses were rated lowest.

A significant number of able students who attended large institutions were dissatisfied with services and facilities and particularly the quality of teaching and size of classes. Many of the financially able students transferred to smaller schools, and those who could not afford to change withdrew or remained under protest. Ratings by students who persisted to graduation indicated as much dissatisfaction as that expressed by nonper-

JUN 13 1980

sisters, hence one might infer that students withdrew because of an inability or unwillingness to endure dissatisfaction rather than *because* of them.

Summerskill[2] in reviewing the literature explored factors associated with nonpersistence. Important biological, social, academic, and motivational attrition factors surfaced. Age at matriculation did not affect attrition although older undergraduates seemed to encounter more obstacles to graduation; males and females withdrew at similar rates. Studies at two universities showed more dropouts among students whose fathers were in skilled, semi-skilled, or service occupations. High school grades were significantly related to college attrition; in ten of eleven studies, nonpersisters had lower cumulative high school grade point averages than did those who were graduated. Average scholastic aptitude scores were found to be lower for nonpersisters in 16 out of 19 investigations. There was also a significant relationship between academic performance in college and attrition. One out of three dropouts occurred for academic reasons. In addition, academic failure was typically cited as the leading single cause of dropouts or as one of two or three leading causes, depending upon the college studied. Very complex data made it difficult to draw concise conclusions concerning attrition and motivational factors. It is noteworthy, though, that students with definite vocational choices and motivation were more likely to graduate. Summerskill concluded that *multicausality* exists in relation to attrition and that there is no single simple remedy.

Along this same line, Cope and Hannah[3] in a later review of the literature, discovered that when considered in isolation, the most commonly used quantitative attrition predictors—grade point averages, ACT, and SAT scores—were not especially useful in solving the dropout problem. Their major conclusion was that dropping-out is not a problem in its own right but a symptom of other conditions. Dropping-out may be beneficial to the student's stage of development and if so is neither harmful to the student nor the institution. "Leaving college will be a necessary action for some students as a part of on-going lifelong learning." (P. 110.)

More recently Kowalski[4] compared questionnaires returned by 250 persisting and 250 nonpersisting students in attendance during the 1973 Fall Semester at Indiana University. Results showed that underachievers with personal problems were the ones most likely to drop out. When students experience difficulties in meeting the social and academic demands of college, whether separately or simultaneously, they may be more likely to withdraw. The father's educational level was found to be a predictor of persistence along with the students' definite career goals and aspirations. The research indicated that parents of dropouts often had histories of serious disappointment in their careers, scholastic interruption, mental disorders, or other experiences such as divorce, desertion, and death. Positive personal interaction between students and their advisers and other faculty members also influenced persistence. The assumption was made that many promising students left the academic environment forever when they might have survived with the proper attention and guidance from an understanding and helpful professor.

As for financial aid and retention, Astin[5] found that as the amount of educational loans increased so did the likelihood of males dropping out,

around six percent, and females about two percent—for some men, leaving college appeared to be more desirable than going further into debt. *Work study as a form of employment tended to contribute to greater retention;* such programs offer productive work and student involvement in campus life. Astin also found that dormitory living during the freshman year increased students' chances of finishing college.

The importance of a proper match between the student and the institutional environment was examined by Tinto[5], who viewed dropping-out of college as a process rather than an event. Tinto's conceptual schema for dropout from college argued that the student enters the college environment with a certain degree of both goal commitment and institutional commitment along with expectations and motivations molded by family and school background and individual attributes. The degree of success of academic and/or social integration will alter goal and institutional commitments, resulting ultimately in persistence or nonpersistence. It should be noted that external factors not directly related to the system, such as family tragedies and financial emergencies, can alter components of the schema.

In dealing with the effects of individual and institutional characteristics upon individual integration into the academic and social systems of the college, Tinto also emphasized the importance of distinguishing between the different variables relating voluntary withdrawal as opposed to academic dismissal. Voluntary withdrawals are different in many ways. This group tends to have higher grades, intellectual development, and socio-economic status than those dismissed for academic reasons and those who persist. Withdrawal appears to be related to lack of congruency of the individual with the social and intellectual climate of the institution.

Pascarella and Terenzinni[7] further expounded upon one element of Tinto's conceptual schema of attrition through a study of students' informal interactions with faculty beyond the classroom. A longitudinal design was used to collect data prior to, during, and subsequent to the 1975-76 academic year. Student responses were obtained from the Activities Index (AI), a twelve-dimension personality index, and from available verbal and math scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The final sample included 344 freshmen, or one out of every seven students in the freshman class. To measure the frequency of students' nonclassroom interaction with faculty, the instrument required students to indicate the number of times during each semester they had met informally with a faculty member. One conclusion was supported by the findings: More than any other students, freshmen with certain personality needs and orientations are more likely to seek out and develop informal relationships with faculty. As a result of these relationships, some students integrate into the system academically and socially and are in turn more likely to persist. Tinto[6] also noted that student interaction with faculty in the student's major area is of crucial importance due to common areas of interest and also the impact on the student's future occupational mobility.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

As Pantages and Creedon[8] have stated, "Attrition is the result of an ex-

tremely intricate interplay among a multitude of variables. As such, attempts to isolate single causal factors are misguided and ultimately futile." (P. 55.) Nevertheless, there are data to suggest the importance of academic advising in improving student retention. Several campus-based studies have shown a link between improved advising and better student retention—note the place of prominence given advising in the American College Testing Program study which follows later.

Results cited by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas[9] are due in no small part to what they call an intrusive advising program. A University College was established there in the early 1970's, intended to serve all entering freshmen and transfer students. Experienced professors who had taught on the college level for an average of nine years and who had expressed a willingness to become involved in close student/faculty relationships were chosen from a cross-section of the faculty, given released time from their teaching assignments, and charged with the responsibility of centralizing academic counseling and student records. A variety of inservice programs were planned to help them reach utmost effectiveness, for example, special workshops, visiting specialists, counseling films, and others.

These faculty counselors handled preadmission counseling, matriculation problems, and individual scheduling. Academic records were reviewed periodically and problems identified. Each semester students were called in for intrusive counseling, and those receiving low mid-term grades were particularly asked to see their counselors. At the conclusion of the first year, 74 percent of students with low scores who were seen by counselors had passed. Not only were students on probation counseled, however; all students were seen at least once each semester. Special efforts were made to see and congratulate students on the dean's list; special honors, independent study opportunities, and information as to scholarships available were offered as encouragement to good students. A Learning Resources Center furnished tutoring in *all* subject areas; emphasis was placed on the development of reading, writing, and study skills.

At the end of the second year, they found that:

- freshman attrition rate had been reduced from 45 to 6 percent;
- the number of students making the dean's honor list had increased 9 percent;
- twenty-five percent of students increased their academic performance to a B average;
- fewer students were placed on academic probation and fewer were suspended for poor academic performance;
- fewer students dropped courses than previously and more students continued in school from semester to semester—less withdrew;
- there was a significant reduction in the number of freshmen needing assistance from the Psychological Clinic—problems were handled before they became a crisis.

The program had been responsible for more course hours and heavier course loads for students. In addition, there was a rather marked increase in the number of new students applying for admission. The University of Nevada,

Las Vegas has 9,000 students with eight colleges—the first year University College enrolled 1,303 students; presently enrollment has risen to 2,875.

Crockett[10] has noted that "helping students use the resources of the institution to implement an academic plan that leads to desired career/life goals can be a powerful retention force." (P. 31.) He cites a renewed interest throughout higher education in academic advising and lists the following causal factors:

1) recognition that academic advising is an integral part of the higher education process, not a minor support service only tangentially related to the purposes of the institution;
2) genuine concern for individual student growth and development;
3) greater student choice of curriculum than ever before;
4) increase in the number of nontraditional students;
5) growing student concern about the linkage between academic preparation and the world of work; and
6) interest in increasing student retention. (P. 29.)

A good advising program is not a happenstance but the results can be worth the time and effort required. Crockett indicates three important retention results of proper advising: a) Students who understand the relationship between their academic preparation and the work they hope to do when they leave are more likely to stay until they have achieved their preparation goals; b) students who perform in a manner consistent with their abilities are more likely to persist in college than those having academic difficulties, and c) students receiving effective academic guidance tend to feel more positive toward the serving institution—a strong contributing factor toward persistence.

"WHAT WORKS IN STUDENT RETENTION"

In the spring of 1979, the American College Testing Program (ACT) and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (MCHEMS) conducted a national survey[11] entitled "What Works in Student Retention" (WWISR), attempting to "identify, analyze, and compile information about campus action programs and efforts for improving student retention in Higher Education." Findings from 879 questionnaires were digested.

Three conclusions resulting from this study, particularly pertinent to large state universities, were:

a) Student retention is a campus-wide issue—curricular offerings, faculty-student contact, support services, and attitudes of faculty and staff all influence retention.
b) The top four problems encountered were lack of time, data, staff, and funds—many retention programs costing very little succeeded, however, despite these problems.
c) Action programs most likely to improve retention involved orientation, advising, learning and academic support, and counseling; multiple approaches succeeded most often.

The following two WWISR tables summarize succinctly: 1) the most important factors influencing student retention, and 2) the impact of action programs.

TABLE 1 (P. 9.)

Most Important Factors Influencing Student Retention

(In Rank Order)

Campus Characteristics	
Negative	
Inadequate academic advising	3.01
Inadequate curricular offerings	2.80
Conflict between class schedule and job	2.77
Inadequate financial aid	2.66
Inadequate counseling support system	2.58
Inadequate extracurricular offerings	2.58
Positive	
Caring attitude of faculty and staff	4.28
High quality of teaching	3.91
Adequate financial aid	3.66
Student involvement in campus life	3.30
High quality of advising	3.23
Dropout-prone	
Low academic achievement	4.46
Limited educational aspirations	4.09
Indecision about major/career goal	3.93
Inadequate financial resources	3.64

Note. Figures are average ratings given by respondents on a scale of one (low) to five (high).

TABLE 2 (P. 19.)

Major Action Program Categories by Type of Institution

(In Percentages)

Action Program Category	**2-Year Public** N = 230	**2-Year Private** 32	**4-Year Public** 281	**4-Year Private** 320	**Total** 863
Learning and academic support	22	28	33	18	24
Advising	12	16	17	11	13
Orientation	12	19	13	13	13
Early warning systems	14	16	6	16	12
Career assistance	4	0	6	6	6
Counseling	5	0	3	5	4
Peer programs	4	3	4	5	4
New policies, structures	4	3	1	5	4
Other	4	0	4	4	4
Exit interviews	4	0	3	3	3
Faculty-staff development	4	3	1	3	3
Multiple action programs	4	3	3	3	3
Dropout studies	4	0	1	2	2
Cocurricular activities	1	3	2	4	2
Curricular developments	2	6	2	2	2

Summary recommendations were that any institution concerned with retention should first organize itself, then study and analyze its institutional data, and finally identify and implement action programs with specific groups in mind.

For obvious reasons, attrition/retention studies have moved from an emphasis upon attrition to a focus on retention. Translation of research into practical terms, easily understood by faculty, counselors, and support personnel, is particularly important, then, if we are to develop the needed action programs to retain students.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

A recent study[12] at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, examined the retention, attrition, and graduation patterns of over 17,000 in-state freshmen admitted from Fall Quarter, 1968 through Summer Quarter, 1973. The following data about the students were analyzed: race, sex, marital status, composite ACT scores, high school grade point averages, county-of-residence wealth, enrolled colleges, and ages.

It was found that 38.8 percent of these students were graduated within 20 consecutive quarters. The table shows selected characteristics of these students along with those of all students admitted during that period.

	Students Graduated Within 20 Consecutive Qtrs.	All Students Admitted Fall, 1968-Summer, 1973
Under 21 at admission	98.1%	97.3%
Not married at admission	89.6	91.2
White	95.4	91.4
H.S.G.P.A. greater than 2.25	92.9	84.5
Composite ACT greater than 16	94.7	89.5
Males	53.7	55.8
Females	46.3	44.2

The college of original enrollment did not appear to affect disproportionately an individual's chances of graduation, with the possible exception of the College of Business—slightly fewer were graduated from the college in five years. Of all students with a composite ACT score of less than 16, 19.5 percent persisted to graduation; and of all students with the ACT score and a HSGPA of less than 2.25, only 9.2 percent were graduated within 20 consecutive quarters. Females tended to graduate earlier or on schedule more frequently than men, as did students enrolled in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Education. Finally, it was found that 56 percent (9,520) of those students not graduated within five years had better than a 2.00 cumulative GPA when they departed.

Several campus-wide programs have been designed with retention in mind. One such program, now in its second year, is the federally funded Educational Assistance Program, intended to assist selected students who are deficient in basic skills. All participants are volunteers who had ACT scores below 17. They receive academic assistance in English, mathematics, biology, and educational psychology. Classes meet more frequently and for longer periods than regular ones, and participants receive in-

dividual attention from faculty and special tutors. Many of the classes are self-paced, and students must attain 90 percent proficiency before proceeding to the next unit. One hundred fifty-eight students are now enrolled. These students have been found to have higher grades than a comparable control group of 100 students. The program has an 85 percent retention; 3 percent transferred to other institutions.

The Orientation Office spearheads two programs aimed at retention: 1) The Freshman Aid Committee Team (FACT) involves a group of experienced students who volunteer to become big brothers and sisters to incoming freshmen. Newcomers are contacted prior to arrival; a member of FACT assists during the entire registration process, with purchasing books, and in locating classrooms. Contact between each pair is maintained throughout the first quarter and there is a mid-quarter bash.
2) A course centering around study skills, career planning, selection of a major, and so forth, is sponsored in residence halls—during Fall Quarter, 1979, almost 75 percent of all new freshmen attended.

The ad hoc Re-Entry Committee, composed of a group of administrative personnel concerned with the problems of re-entry students, has initiated programs and produced brochures in an effort to help returning students acquire the necessary information for a smooth re-entry.

In addition to these programs already in action, the Committee for Student Cultivation, Retention, and Summer School, appointed by the Chancellor in the Summer of 1978, is attempting to learn to what extent there is a retention problem and to propose appropriate intervention. Their specific objectives are to:

a) identify those institutional factors which contribute to failure to matriculate,
b) identify those institutional factors which tend to contribute to the incidence of attrition,
c) determine and analyze the UTK attrition rates,
d) describe current retention-related activities on the UTK campus,
e) identify additional data to address UTK retention problems, and
f) increase campus awareness of retention and help develop a positive attitude toward retention of students.

The Committee has conducted individual interviews with selected administrative personnel, faculty members, and students. Participants were asked to list the factors they thought contributed to attrition or retention and to make suggestions for improvement. Most felt it would be helpful if we had:

- more experienced or higher ranked faculty teaching freshman courses
- smaller freshman classes
- fewer freshman courses via television
- only interested faculty engaged in advising
- more programs that support the open-door philosophy of the Admissions Office (many students are admitted to the University with the potential to fail)

- workshops and training sessions for supervisory personnel (to improve coordination and communication of information between offices)
- special programs and support groups for the re-entry students
- a more positive attitude on the part of all personnel who interact with students

CONCLUSIONS

Retention is a myriad and complex issue and the energies of all campus constituencies are needed to create a staying environment—students, faculty, and all administrative and support personnel. We can not overplay the importance of each member of this institution being a positive public-relations force for the University in our day-to-day interaction with students. There is no place in a scholarly environment for rudeness, misinformation, or a lackadaisical attitude. A realization of the University's commitment must be clearly understood. Knowing why students stay and why they leave can be a valuable aid in retention, but in the final analysis, attrition is an act of human behavior and can only be comprehended when viewed within the context of the individual(s) within the operation of the serving institution. The reduction of student withdrawal here at UTK, then, is the responsibility of the entire campus community.

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